



Instruction Commons Guides

Choosing & Narrowing a Topic



- ▶ **Commons Home**
- ▶ **Courses**
- ▶ **Guides**
- ▶ **About the Commons**

Quick Guide

Introduction

Maybe you already have a topic in mind. Or perhaps you aren't sure what you want the topic of your speech or paper to be. Either way, this four-step guide will help you to choose a topic, find background information, narrow the focus of your topic, and write a topic statement that will help guide the development of your speech or paper.

▶ Step 1: Generate Ideas	▶ Step 2: Background Information
▶ Step 3: Narrow Your Topic	▶ Step 4: Write a Topic Statement

Generate Ideas

Think about the following questions. Better yet, take a pen and paper and write down some responses. *You will, of course, need to keep the parameters of the assignment in mind.*

Questions:	Examples:
What is your major? What aspects of your major interest you?	Education - bilingualism in the US. Agriculture - feeding the world. Graphic design - how color influences mood.
What hobbies or special interests do you have?	Body piercing. Saving the environment.
Is there a topic that you think your classmates should know about?	Destruction of rainforests by oil companies. The side-effects of secondhand smoke.

What topics have been in the news lately?	Browse through newspapers, online or in the Library, to learn about current events.
---	---

It is okay to think broadly at this point. You will narrow your topic by looking at some background information and asking yourself some questions about your topic.

Find Background Information

Look at your list of topics. You might have to discard topics as not appropriate for this assignment. Choose one or two that interest you the most as potential topics. Keep in mind your audience and the assignment.

The topics on your list are quite broad. A way to start to narrow your topic is to look at some general background information about the subject.

- One of the best places to look for background information is in **encyclopedias**. The Library has many encyclopedias, both general ones, like *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and more specific ones such as the *Concise Encyclopaedia of Foods and Nutrition*.

As you read the encyclopedia entries, note interesting facts or ideas. (Write down some answers to these questions.) The example below shows how you can move from a simple idea (here, coffee) to an actual topic. Be sure to include the *source(s)* of your information, since you will need this information for your bibliography.

Questions:	Example answers <i>topic: coffee</i>
What new things have you learned about the topic?	Coffee has been cultivated since the 15th century. The first coffeehouse opened in 1652 in London. Coffee is consumed by a third of the world.
What aspects of the topic might be interesting to include in your speech or paper?	The history of coffee drinking. The popularity of coffee in the United States. How caffeine works in the human body.
What new questions do you have about the topic as a result of reading this encyclopedia entry?	How much land is used to grow coffee? How much money is made from coffee sales each year? What is the chemical structure of caffeine?

Note: While encyclopedias are great starting places, you'll definitely want to use more sources in preparing your research, such as books or journal articles, in order to have a well-balanced examination of facts and issues.

Narrow Your Topic

By now you have a general topic (or two) and some background information. Your topic is probably still too broad and needs to be more manageable.

Take a look at the questions that you answered about your topic and brainstorm what some narrower aspects of the topic might be. Write down your ideas.

Here's a list following the example of the topic **coffee**:

- History of coffee growing
- Popularity of coffeehouses
- Impact of coffee on the world economy
- How caffeine works in the human body
- Coffee - from growing to brewing

Review the list that you just made. Choose one or two narrower topics. Keep the following in mind:

- Who is your audience? Which of these narrower topics will be the most interesting to both you and your audience? Which topics will be understood by the audience? (Is the audience a professor reading a paper, or other students listening to a presentation?)
- What are the specifics of the assignment? Which topics will fit? (Note that the above examples are all informative in nature, perhaps not good for a persuasive speech or paper. A related topic focused on chemistry might interest you, but not be appropriate for an economics course.)
- How long do you have to cover the topic? Is it still too broad?
- Which of these narrower topics interests you the most? After all, you need to do further research on this topic... it will be more difficult if it doesn't interest you.

Now that you have settled on a more specific topic, write it down as topic statement.

Write a Topic Statement

A topic statement expresses the topic and purpose of your paper or speech. You will refer to the topic statement as you start your research. Referring to your topic statement during research can help you stay focused.

Continuing the theme of coffee, here is an example topic statement:

I will persuade the reader that moderate consumption of coffee is beneficial. I will use recent information on the health aspects (mental and physical) of coffee consumption. I will also address the negative aspects of excessive coffee drinking. Background information will include how caffeine is processed by the human body.

Updated by Commons;
Original by K. Kern, 1999

[Commons Home](#) | [Courses](#) | [Guides](#) | [What is The Commons?](#) | [e-Library](#)

Instruction Commons, Iowa State University Library
Copyright 1999-2006

Send comments on this page to [Commons Staff](#)

Last updated: Monday, May 03, 2004 04:16 PM